

Ghost 70

Chapter 70: the river show

The drums of noon rolled across the city like distant thunder. The Festival of Alliance had swelled to its heartbeat—the moment when every street emptied toward the Jade River to see the famed Riverside Show.

Laughter, hawkers' cries, and the smell of roasted chestnuts tangled in the air. Color poured through the crowd in waves—silks, ribbons, parasols—until the whole riverbank looked alive.

"Come on!" Lian An's younger sister, Lian Hua, tugged at her sleeve. "They've started calling people—if we're late, we won't see anything!"

Their cousin Lian Ruo sighed, pretending reluctance while trying to hide his own curiosity. "You sound like you're storming a fortress."

"That's right," Lian An said, laughing as she let herself be dragged. "Forward charge!"

The three of them weaved through the crowd toward the riverside. The stage floated on the shimmering water, its red silk banners swaying gently. Trumpets sounded; dancers in scarlet lined up behind the drummers, the sun flashing off their golden anklets.

Lian An adjusted her light blue veil, keeping her head slightly lowered. Though she wore simple linen like any other lady of the city, grace betrayed her—every movement composed, her voice too clear, her smile too steady. A passer-by might not know who she was, but anyone who had looked long enough at the throne would recognize the quiet authority in her posture.

Among the Crowd

Across the same riverbank, two more figures had arrived earlier and already taken seats on woven mats close to the stage.

Emperor Rong Zhen and Lady Chen, both dressed as ordinary travelers, blended into the festival perfectly. He had discarded every trace of gold and insignia; she wore a plain rose robe and straw hat that shaded her delicate face. They could have been a merchant couple resting from their journey.

Lady Chen's eyes sparkled as she watched the stage. "Your Majesty—no, husband," she corrected herself with a playful smile, "isn't this beautiful? The whole river looks like a sea of fire."

He inclined his head slightly. "It's lively."

"Lively?" She laughed. "You sound like an old monk forced to attend a wedding."

Rong Zhen's lips curved faintly. "Then perhaps I need better company to make me less solemn."

She gave him a pleased nudge with her shoulder, but he was already looking past her—across the crowd, toward the willows.

From that distance he saw three figures pushing through the people: a young man carrying parcels, a bright-eyed girl darting ahead, and between them a woman in a light veil, calm even while being pulled by her sister. Something about her gait—steady, precise, familiar—struck him like recognition.

His eyes narrowed.

When she lifted her hand to fix her veil, sunlight caught the edge of her sleeve. He knew that movement.

Lian An.

The corner of his mouth lifted in disbelief, then in amusement.

That woman... what kind of trouble are you chasing now?

He exhaled through his nose, half laughter, half resignation. The Empress had escaped the Duke's estate for a few days of rest—and here she was, hidden in plain sight, walking into the same festival as he and Lady Chen. The gods, he thought, had a twisted sense of humor.

Lady Chen noticed the faint smile on his lips. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," he said quickly. "Just... an unexpected sight."

She followed his gaze but saw only a sea of strangers. "You find amusement in everything today. I suppose that's good."

"Perhaps," he murmured, still watching the veiled figure settle beneath the willow. "Some surprises are good."

The Show Begins

The announcer's voice boomed across the water:

"Honored guests! The River of Fire and Water shall begin! Let us honor friendship between kingdoms and the joy of our people!"

A drumbeat answered. Dancers leapt forward, ribbons of flame twisting in the air. The river reflected every spark until it seemed to burn. Gasps rippled through the audience.

Lian Hua clapped wildly. "Look, Sister! He breathed fire from his mouth!"

Lian Ruo ducked away from the heat and muttered, "And nearly lost his eyebrows."

Lian An laughed. "If you two argue this loudly, we'll be thrown into the river."

The crowd laughed and cheered as the performers balanced on long bamboo poles planted in the stage. One dancer spun twin swords, their edges catching the sun, slicing arcs of light that glittered like falling stars. Music swelled—drums, flutes, and strings rising together until the whole air trembled.

Rong Zhen sat perfectly still. For once, his mind held no maps, no decrees. Only color, rhythm, and the ghost of laughter from across the river. Lady Chen watched him and thought, He seems almost human again.

She leaned closer. "Do you remember the last time we sneaked out like this?"

He turned his head slightly. "Before the coronation."

"You bought me wine with a fake coin."

"And you threatened to expose me if I didn't buy you dumplings too."

She smiled at the memory. For a heartbeat they were simply man and woman, not ruler and consort. But his eyes drifted once more toward the willow tree. The faintest crease touched her brow.

The Drums of Noon

The fire dance ended in a burst of sparks. The announcer bowed dramatically, voice carrying clear across the river.

"And now, to close the first act—our Dance of Lovers across the Flame! But this tale needs one more player! A lady from the audience, brave and kind! Who shall it be?"

Excited murmurs rolled through the crowd. Dozens of hands shot up.

"Pick me!"

"My wife can dance!"

"Here, sir—choose my daughter!"

Lian Hua jumped up, waving both arms. "Here! Pick my sister! She dances beautifully!"

Lian An nearly dropped her pastry. "Hua!"

Her cousin covered his mouth, choking on laughter. "She's just teasing—"

But the announcer's keen eyes caught the motion of blue silk in the sea of people. He grinned and pointed directly at their spot.

"You, the lady in the veil! Yes, you! Come join us!"

The crowd erupted in cheers.

Lian An froze. "He means someone else."

"No," said Lian Hua, glowing with wicked delight, "he definitely means you!"

Lian Ruo leaned back, enjoying himself far too much. "Cousin, you can refuse, of course. But the crowd looks... persuasive."

Sure enough, the people around them were already urging her forward, clapping, laughing, calling encouragements. There was no escape without drawing more attention.

Lian An exhaled slowly through her veil. "You two are insufferable."

Hua giggled. "You love us."

She groaned, rising to her feet. "If I trip, I'm blaming both of you."

The Emperor's Smile

Across the river, Rong Zhen almost laughed out loud when he saw her stand. The expression that flickered over his face was equal parts disbelief and amusement.

"She's actually going up," he murmured.

Lady Chen, startled, looked around. "Who?"

"That woman the announcer picked."

"What about her?"

"She reminds me of someone I know." He leaned forward slightly, eyes gleaming with the thrill of recognition. "Someone who never learns to stay quiet."

Lady Chen frowned. "You sound... amused by her."

"Shouldn't I be?" he said lightly, though his tone carried that half-hidden warmth that made Lady Chen's stomach tighten. "It's rare to see courage so... spontaneous."

She turned her gaze back to the stage, unaware that the veiled dancer stepping nervously onto the floating platform was none other than the Empress herself.